



A JOURNAL OF ORTHODOX FAITH AND CULTURE

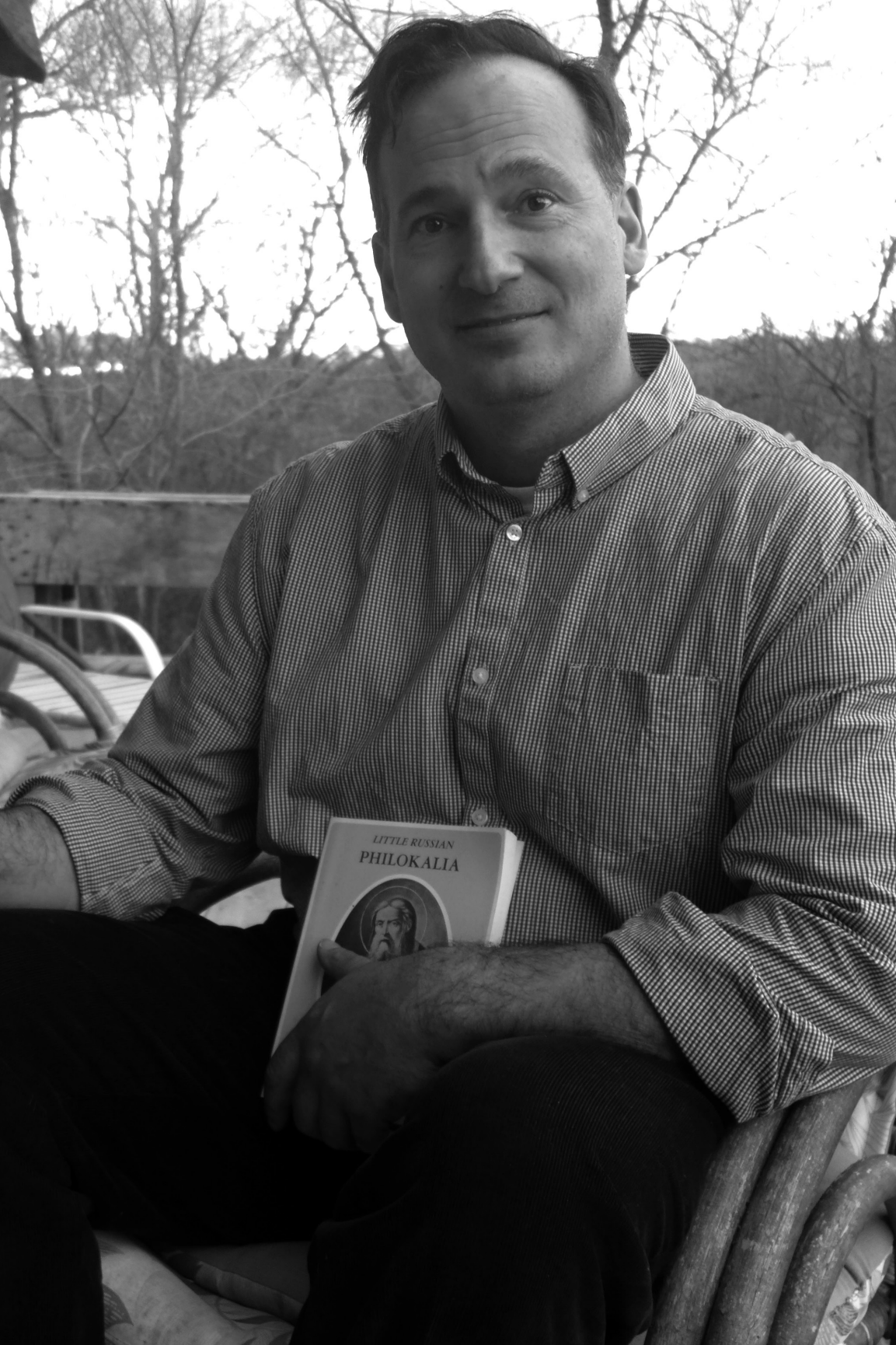
# ROAD TO EMMAUS

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# THE MOTOVILOFFS IN AMERICA

## Finding Russian Roots

In an unexpected meeting this past Fall, our *Road to Emmaus* editor was introduced to John, Kerry and Anne Motoviloff, a second family bearing the name, this time in Madison, Wisconsin. Our spirited conversation over the afternoon mirrored the warm faithfulness towards St. Seraphim and the legacy of Nikolai Motovilov that we had already encountered in their distant Moscow cousins.

RTE: So, John, Kerry, and Anne, what can you tell us about your family connection with the Motoviloff line?<sup>1</sup>

JOHN: We are descendants from the Motoviloff line through my mother, Kathryn Motoviloff, and my wonderful grandparents, Michael (Mikhail) Philipovich Motoviloff and Anna Frycz Motoviloff. When my wife Kerry and I decided to marry and I began thinking about who I was, it was evident that my very rich cultural and religious upbringing had been entirely within the Motoviloff family. Although my mother resumed the Motoviloff name when she and my father divorced, it was my grandfather's dearest wish to have had a son to pass the name to because he was afraid it would die out. So, when we married, we decided to take Motoviloff as our family name.

My grandfather, Michael Philipovich Motoviloff, was born in 1901 in the Russian region of Vyatka (now Kirov), and raised in the town of Lapt'evo, on the western slope of the Ural Mountains. He was baptized Russian Orthodox

<sup>1</sup> Upon arriving in America, Michael Motoviloff's name was anglicized with two "ff's at the end, rather than with a "v".

*Opposite: John Motoviloff, Madison, Wisconsin.*



and grew up as one of four brothers: Mikhail, Fyodor, Alexander, and Pavel. (Pavel, unfortunately, died as a young man after being struck by lightning.)

Their father was Philip Feodorovich Motovilov, and their grandfather was Feodor Nikolaivich Motovilov. Feodor originally came from the village of Motovilovo, near Moscow, and was the first Motovilov to settle in Lapt'evo. Four factors, including: the relative rarity of our last name; the patronymic Nikolaivich; the timing (Feodor Nikolaivich Motovilov was born in the mid-1800s, only a generation after St. Seraphim's disciple Nikolai Motovilov); and the fact that Nikolai Motovilov had owned estates in the vicinity of Moscow, strongly suggest a link to him, perhaps through a cousin.

RTE: So, your grandfather grew up in imperial Russia.

ANNE: Yes, and after the 1917 Russian Revolution he was conscripted into the Red Army. The Red Army, of course, was Bolshevik and Communist, while the White Army was made up of those who sided with the Tsar and the monarchy. Once the Communists came to power, many of those conscripted were not morally with the Red Army, but the punishment for refusing to serve was probably death. Such was the case, we think, with Michael, who was drafted in 1918 and shortly thereafter critically wounded in battle.

At the field hospital, he was pronounced dead and carried to the morgue, but a nurse walking through the line of bodies happened to see his finger move, and told the doctors, "This one is still alive." He was taken to a medical ward, where he slowly returned to life.

When he was released from the hospital, Michael returned home. Although he had not fully recovered, he knew that he would eventually be returned to the front, and the chance of surviving a second time was very small. In the meantime, his godfather John Zarnitsyn, and other relatives were preparing to emigrate, so Michael decided to go with them. He knew that if he was caught trying to leave, he would be arrested as a deserter from the Red Army and imprisoned or executed, so he borrowed his younger brother's identity papers to travel as "Alexander Motoviloff". His brother Fyodor also helped by supplying a horse, and both brothers were imprisoned for some time by the Bolsheviks for the assistance they provided.

The group walked and rode by wagon nearly 1200 miles due west to Riga, Latvia, which in 1918 had been established as an independent republic, and was no longer a part of Russia. Fearing detection, they traveled in farmers'

*Opposite: John's grandparents, Michael and Anna Motoviloff on their wedding day, 1935.*

wagons – sometimes hidden with the contents of the wagon – and often at night on foot. When they finally reached Riga, Michael, John Zarnitsyn and the others boarded a ship for America, traveling in steerage, where he was listed as Alexander Motoviloff.

JOHN: Another very unexpected piece of family history is that America was not completely unknown territory because Michael's father, Philip, had also visited at the end of the 19th century. Philip was a man of means in Russia – a landowner who was also interested in art, and curious about life in America. He traveled along the East Coast and came as far west as Aurora, Illinois, where he did some painting as a muralist, of all things. Unfortunately, the mural no longer exists.

ANNE: After they landed at Ellis Island, Michael lived with his godfather's family. During his first years in America, he worked at a variety of jobs in New Jersey, New York, and Connecticut, including Sikorsky Aircraft, a pioneer in helicopter manufacturing. At one time he even owned property on Long Island. Like his father, Michael was a man of many interests and talents. He was also a water diviner (finding new sources of water without mechanical equipment), an experienced furrier, and was known among family and friends as an excellent ice skater. He later moved to Newark, New Jersey where he met Anna Frycz, a Ukrainian immigrant whom he married in 1935, fifteen years after his arrival.

Although Anna's family was from western Ukraine near Lviv, she had been born in Oil City, Pennsylvania. For reasons we don't understand, she was sent back to the Ukraine at about four years-old with her brother and only returned in 1925, before the Ukrainian famines. She and Michael had two daughters: Kathryn, born in 1936, and Ellen in 1937. Throughout their lives, Anna and Michael spoke a mixture of Russian and Ukrainian, and Anna learned very good English. Michael had a strong cultural association with Russia and was not interested in learning English fluently, so he did not really assimilate. In fact, he was a man of few words.

JOHN: As Anne said, he had a very deep connection to Russia, even to the music he listened to and the foods he ate, but he didn't feel a need to share that in a personal way. Although I had great admiration, respect, and warmth for him (he and my grandmother were like second parents to me), it wasn't easy to draw him out. He was a very old-school patriarch, and if

he had something he wanted to tell you or show you, you might get a single story about his childhood in Russia, but no more.

One story that he told was about the Theophany Service of the Blessing of the Waters, when they cut a hole in the ice to bless the water with the cross to celebrate Christ's Baptism. There was always a live dove as part of the service, and it was so cold that the priest would have to keep the dove warm next to his chest. At least one year the temperatures were so frigid that the dove died.

After their marriage, most of my grandfather's working life was spent as a machinist at the Purolator Corporation. He could fix anything, and he made his own tools, some of which I still have. When he built or mended something, instead of using standard carpentry nails, he would very often make wooden nails, which he called *pluks* – plugs. When I asked him why, he said that in Russia they had had to make their own nails, so the idea of using wood doweling was very natural. He was so in tune with the natural world that he worked with metal and wood in a way that was almost uncanny. Another thing is that my grandfather had somewhat Asiatic features and as he got older that became more pronounced. Except for his gray eyes, he looked almost Asian. There was a very different sensibility there.

RTE: There are many Russian families with a trace of that, perhaps going back to Central Asian Tatars or Mongols. Was your grandfather ever able to return to Russia?

JOHN: Yes, in 1978 he traveled back to Lapt'evo with his daughter Ellen to see if he could find his relatives. I should add here that none of this story would be known – and this meeting between us today would have been impossible – without my Aunt Ellen, who learned Russian, researched our family lineage, and reestablished contact with the brothers living in Lapt'evo.

He had been gone for more than fifty years, with very little contact with his family. When they set out, he was worried that he might be detained and punished for having deserted from the Red Army. He and my aunt were never formally detained, but there were some strange travel glitches and delays. It is hard to say if these were some kind of harassment or just the reality of travel in the Soviet Union at that time. In Lapt'evo he was reunited with his two living brothers and stayed in his childhood village. Even as late as the 70s, the village did not have running water or indoor plumbing. To take a bath they heated a giant copper kettle, and then drew straws to see who got the first bath.







*Left to right: Alexander, Michael and Fyodor Motoviloff at the train station during Michael's 1978 visit.*

Over the years there were scattered stories about the village. When I asked about growing vegetables, he replied that it was too cold to grow anything, but that they did keep animals in a village stable. There was one story about his brother Fyodor, who didn't close the stable door one night after having had too much to drink. Wolves and bears got in and destroyed everything.

RTE: That is a wonderful portrait of your grandfather. Can you tell us now about how this has played out in your generation?

JOHN: My grandparents were married in 1935 at St. Michael's Church in Newark, as were my parents later, and where my siblings and I, as well as a number of my nieces and nephews were baptized. My mother and aunt had excelled in school and, while raising four children, my mother went back to get a Master's Degree in Library Science. My brother and I were altar boys at Sts. Peter and Paul's Orthodox Church in Manville, New Jersey. There were a number of Orthodox Churches in town that served the Slavic immigrants – Russians, Slavs from Eastern Poland, Western Ukrainians, Carpatho-Russians and Belo-Russians – mostly working for the Johns Manville Corporation which still manufactures roofing and insulation materials.

RTE: So, it was your mother and grandparents who took you to church?

JOHN: My grandmother Anna was baptized Greek Catholic, but after marrying my grandfather, she became Orthodox and raised her daughters in the Orthodox Church. In some ways, she was the driving force behind our church life. My grandfather would go to church on holidays, but he was a hard-working man and his work was his life. If it wasn't for his birth into Orthodoxy I would not be here today, but he did not have the spiritual drive that my grandmother did.

RTE: With your family tradition that Nikolai Motovilov is your ancestor, can you trace your lineage back to his native Simbirsk?

JOHN: When my Aunt Ellen did her own genealogical research, she also came up with the Lithuanian connection that Olga Igorievna Motovilov from Moscow mentions in her interview. Our name is not extremely common in Russia, and although we haven't been able to establish all of the links, there is a strong family tradition that we are part of Nikolai Motovilov's line. I would love to know how we fit in with the Moscow branch of the family. We hope to speak with them, and I hope they can help.

The other branch of the family in the United States live in the San Francisco Bay area, and left Russia through Shanghai. The father's name was Vladimir Motovilov, and he strongly identified with the White Russians. He and his son Nicholas also trace their lineage back to St. Seraphim's disciple Nikolai. Sadly, Vladimir and his wife Claudia are deceased, as is Nicholas, but we are in touch with Vladimir's daughter, Tanya, and her husband Oleg. Vladimir was the one who contacted my mother, as we were the only other Motovilovs he could find in the United States.

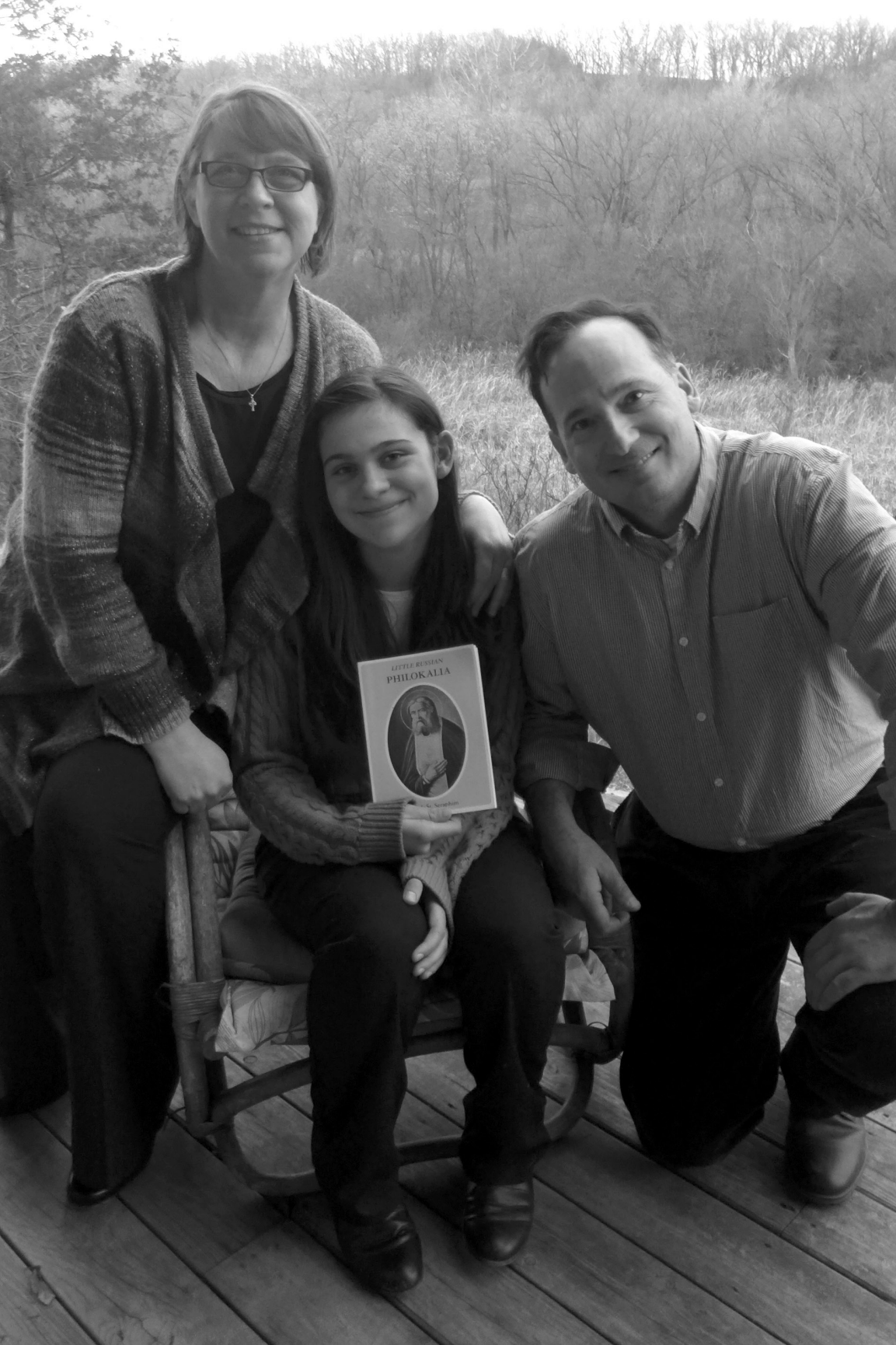
RTE: When did you first hear about your family's connection with St. Seraphim?

JOHN: From childhood certainly. My mother Kathryn, as well as my Aunt Ellen, who is also my godmother, are both very connected to this story. In fact, my aunt owned and operated a greeting card business in which the profits went to charities in Russia and Eastern Europe. After she told me about our ancestor Nikolai's conversation with St. Seraphim, I purchased and read *A Wonderful Revelation to the World: A Conversation of St. Seraphim of Sarov and N. A. Motovilov*.<sup>2</sup> There is a gentleness and generosity of spirit to it that I feel has come down to my family, particularly to my mother and aunt. Certainly, it is the conduit through which my spirituality and heritage has come.

My aunt says that St. Seraphim and Nikolai both had strong connections to nature, which is interesting because, in addition to being a writer, my profession is teaching adults to hunt and fish. Another strange thing about this is that my grandfather came from such an isolated forest background, and then landed in the most urban city in America. I've often thought that if my grandparents had instead come to Milwaukee, then bought a house in Northern Wisconsin, they could have recreated their story in a way that was less schizophrenic. New York and Central New Jersey are light years apart from a village in the Russian Urals.

When I asked, "Did you fish or hunt as a boy?" my grandfather would say, "For food," so, I do feel that there is a deep link between us. If a month has gone by and I haven't spent time immersed in nature, whether foraging, hunting, fishing, or building, I have a profound sense of displacement and loss.

<sup>2</sup> *A Wonderful Revelation to the World: A Conversation of St. Seraphim of Sarov and N. A. Motovilov* (St. Nectarios Press, 1993). You may also see the full conversation between St. Seraphim of Sarov and Nikolai Motovilov in *An Extraordinary Peace: St. Seraphim, Flame of Sarov*, Anaphora Press, Port Townsend, WA, 2009, pp. 111-138. ([www.anaphorapress.com](http://www.anaphorapress.com))



LITTLE RUSSIAN  
PHILOKALIA



St. Seraphim

RTE: And your connection to Nikolai Motovilov?

JOHN: I feel it so deeply that it seems to have been there almost before I was able to think or speak. It comes to me through nature and through my Russian heritage. I would say it exists in the spiritual realm. It is profound.

RTE: Anne, do you also feel that lineage?

ANNE: I first heard the story about St. Seraphim and Motovilov when I was young, and for me it's always been a fascinating part of our family history. Over time we've also become interested in different branches of the family.

KERRY: And, like Nikolai Motovilov, you also have a strong sense of spirituality, of ethics, justice, and fair-treatment.

ANNE: (*Smiling*) I'm the daughter of a labor organizer and a philosophy major, so that explains a lot.

RTE: Kerry, will you end our interview by telling us one of your warmest memories as part of the Motoviloff family?

KERRY: When we went to John's mother in 1993 to announce our engagement, both Michael and Anna had already passed on, so we told Kathryn, "We are engaged and we will be the Motoviloffs." She stood up, went to the corner, and took down the painted Russian glasses from the top shelf. Then she poured out some vodka and made the first toast to the Motoviloff family. As we all thought of Michael and his legacy, she smiled happily and gave the old Russian toast: "*Na Zdorovie.*" ✦

*With gratitude to Ellen Miller (nee Motoviloff) whose years of genealogical research into family connections made possible the rich detail in this interview with John Motoviloff, her nephew.*

*Opposite: Kerry, Anne, and John Motoviloff.*



John Motoviloff is the author of numerous books, articles and poems, both fiction and nonfiction. They include:

*Wild Rice Goose and Other Dishes of the Upper Midwest* (Univ. of Wisconsin, 2014)

*Flyfisher's Guide to Wisconsin and Iowa* (Wilderness Adventures Press, 2007)

*Wisconsin Wildfoods: 100 Recipes for Badger State Bounties* (Trails Books, 2005)

*Flyfisher's Guide to Wisconsin* (Flyfisher's Guides, 2003)

*Driftless Stories: Outdoors in Southwest Wisconsin* (Trails Publishing, 2001)

*Opposite: Michael Motoviloff, a talented ice skater. Circa 1920s.*